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**Wary watch on Hamas victory**  
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No one should have been surprised by the Hamas victory in last week's Palestinian elections. Hamas ran a disciplined campaign against the ruling party, Fatah, which was in disarray internally and widely despised for its failure to deliver peace or prosperity to ordinary Palestinians.

Likewise, we need to be sober now in our assessments of the implications. There is no doubt Hamas' victory all but rules out any early revival of the peace process.

But, in the long term, it may come to be seen as a necessary first step in Palestinian house-cleaning that, ultimately, delivered a leadership better able to rule its own people and engage in negotiations with Israel.

Fatah leader and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has already spoken of his desire to resume peace talks. Elected in a separate poll and, therefore, able to continue in office, he may seek to conduct negotiations through the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the Palestinian national movement's umbrella organisation of which Hamas is not a member.

The problem is that, even if Abbas can establish a separate channel for negotiations with Israel, Hamas' mandate will limit his room for manoeuvre in those talks.

And, with Hamas now potentially in control of key ministries, it can thwart the implementation of key Palestinian commitments under the internationally-backed "Road Map for Peace" that are essential preconditions for negotiations — chief among them the obligation to prevent terror attacks.

Understandably, therefore, few Israelis are sanguine about the prospect of the chief perpetrator of suicide bombings now, theoretically, being in charge of stopping them. Indeed, the election result will only harden Israeli disillusionment with a peace process launched over a decade ago.

Most Israelis and Palestinians had hoped it would deliver two states for two peoples. Instead it has ended up creating a fragmented and dysfunctional Palestinian entity whose new government is committed in word and deed to Israel's destruction.

Nevertheless, we should not be entirely despondent about the future of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

In some respects, little will change. Even while Fatah was in charge, the Palestinian Authority was doing little to prevent terror attacks or disarm terror groups. As a result, there was little prospect of a resumption of negotiations, even if Fatah had won.

Hamas may well continue to adhere to the current ceasefire negotiated by Abbas with Palestinian militant groups last year to help it win international respectability. Indeed, the immediate risk in terms of new acts of terrorism comes from Fatah militants enraged by the election outcome.

It is also important to remember why Hamas won. Undoubtedly, some Palestinians backed Hamas' hard-line ideological position on Israel. But, in a campaign in which Hamas focused heavily on internal issues, a greater factor was the desire of Palestinians to punish Fatah for a decade of inept and corrupt rule.

In this respect, there is hope for Fatah, and a heavy burden ahead for Hamas. For Fatah, the loss may ultimately prove to be the electoral disaster it had to have to renew the party and clear out the dead wood and corrupt elements.

Meanwhile, Hamas will now have to deliver on promises to improve Palestinian lives — a task that is neither easy nor achievable without Israeli co-operation.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Hamas is trying to draw Fatah and other Palestinian groups into a coalition, to share the responsibility — or blame — for resolving Palestinian problems. Fatah is already signalling that it will not join any Hamas government for the same reason.

There has also been talk of Hamas moderating as a function of being in power. Some Hamas leaders have made soothing noises to this effect, and the emergence of a more pragmatic line on peace process issues is possible over the longer term.

But we should be cautious. Even if some Hamas leaders see value in pragmatism, there remain others who are steadfastly committed to the armed struggle and the movement retains a military wing more than capable of acting on those impulses.

Here the international community has a role to play. While respecting the outcome of the elections, most Western governments have correctly made future dealings with a Hamas government conditional on its recognition of Israel and its abandonment of terrorism.

Given that Hamas will need both international recognition and the financial assistance that the donor community provides, the world has real leverage here. Provided it maintains a unified position, it could — and should — use it to great effect.

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